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"JOURNEY TO AN EXPECTATION:" A REFLECTION AND A PRAYER

DARYL CUMBER DANCE

From Francis Williams in the first quarter of the 18th century to Phillis Wheatley in 1773 to C. L. R. James in 1932, to Sam Selvon and George Lamming in 1950, they pack their manuscripts and head to the Mother Country seeking the approval of the Colonialist Publisher, carrying a dream that cannot come true for the Black Colonial¹ on this side of the ocean, certainly not in a little island where all too often people think the only artists are calypsonians or reggae stars. I can envision those budding writers setting out on what Lamming called their "journey to an expectation,"² boarding the ship, clutching their sheafs of paper, much more valuable than the letters of introduction and the clothes and whatever other baggage they carry. This manuscript they have sweated over, this is their life, this is their story that the world is waiting to read-if only the powers that be in England place their stamp of approval. The twentieth century writers had sometimes seen their poems and short stories printed in an often irregular quarterly literary magazine like *Bim*, *Trinidad*, *The Beacon*, and *Kyk-over-al*, or in some little island weekly newspaper like the *Trinidad Guardian* and its *Guardian Weekly*-but what were such banal sheets where people were likely to pay more attention to the obituary notices than their poems! How could publication in these rags compare with the likes of a McGraw Hill, a Wingate, or a MacGibbon and Kee! Now, and only now, were they on their way to seek the approval that *really* mattered. How I have imagined Phillis Wheatley on that trip! Did she share with those other passengers who would deign to speak with the young Black girl the substance of her most protected baggage? How I relish the story of C. L. R., on his way to the Mother Country with his "papers," among which was the draft of *Minty Alley*, written on red paper.

Tell me I look back to a time past! Tell me that with a Caribbean Nobel Prize winner all these things are of a bygone era! Tell me that there are now some local Caribbean publishers! Remind me that just last night³ I spent the evening with a representative from a major European publisher traveling in Trinidad and Jamaica, seeking *just the collection "she" has in mind* for Carafesta! No, I tell you, things have *not* changed, as the story I want to share with you illustrates. That infamous "journey" remains, alas, a requisite for the island artist; only the mode of transportation has changed.

Well, my story starts on Monday, March 19, 1995, when I, as usual, was in the slowest moving line among the crowd waiting to board the Miami flight at Trinidad's Piarco International Airport. Imagine my surprise when I glimpsed novelist Earl Lovelace. A hug, a quick catch up—"I see your interviews are out. You

¹ Yes, Sam Selvon called himself Black.

² *The Pleasures of Exile*. 1960. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P., 1992, 211.

³ I wrote the first draft of this piece in the Atlanta Airport on march 19, 1995, and completed it in Houston, TX, in July 1995, just after the birth of my first grandson.

keeping up the good work, eh?" "Yes, but what about yourself, I reading a article on *Dragon* in every periodical I pick up. You doing o.k., man!"-and we discover we're on the same flight to Miami, where I will go on to Atlanta and then Richmond, and he-he's on his way to London with a new manuscript, . . . seeking a publisher.

Lovelace is in the aisle seat, last row of first class; I'm in the bulk head, aisle seat, and so we can reach around to each other. He hands me the first third of the manuscript of a new novel, *Salt*. Memories of unbelievable coincidences/fantastic privileges for a teacher/scholar flood over me as I settle back and open the folder. It is hard to believe; I read the manuscript of either *The School Master* or *The Wine of Astonishment* in 1967 when Lovelace and I were both teaching during the summer in a Virginia Union University headstart program. Then in 1980 a friend who had just read the manuscript of what was to become one of the most celebrated Caribbean novels of the last fifteen years (*The Dragon Can't Dance*) let me read it while I was in the Boston area overnight. Shortly thereafter when I went to Trinidad to interview Lovelace in 1980, he offered me the draft of *Jestina's Calypso* as a rebuttal to some of my criticism of his female characters. Now, here I was again privileged to read a fourth Lovelace manuscript prior to publication.

Interestingly enough, the first third of the manuscript (all of which I read) focuses on a young Trinidadian who passes up his opportunity to migrate to Europe and instead stays home to help teach young Trinidadians (surely a reflection of his creator's commitment). He goes on a hunger strike to change the system from one where all the energies are invested in helping that talented 1/10 prepare for the exams that will help that person escape Trinidad.⁴ Rather he devotes himself to the education (as opposed to preparation for the exams) of the ordinary Trinidadian student. There are a whole heap of fascinating images whose further development I eagerly anticipate in the final two-thirds of the novel. Lovelace begins with his youthful narrator recalling his excitement at his uncle's accounts of his slave grandfather who flew back to Africa. His teacher upon whom we focus during the present of the novel is the son of a poor peasant who works all of his life to build a house-a sacrifice that results in the death of his mother whose fervent goal had been for her son to escape Trinidad. The father, however, is proud that his son remains, and assures him that there will be a room in this house that he has been building all these thirty-plus years. Further, our teacher had a bird which he discovers one day bloody in its cage, having starved to death as it desperately tried to break free of the bars that held it in this tiny prison. Lovelace is working in this intriguing narrative on a host of images of the post-Colonial condition, and it is quite clear that the sermon he preaches here is similar to the messages in all of his works from his very first novel, *While Gods Are Falling* (1965).

Lovelace is not quite the young Wheatley or Lamming or Selvon or James embarking on his first journey across the sea. Indeed Lovelace is an almost sixty-

⁴ Another irony intrudes. I carry in my bag an article cut out of the *Trinidad Sunday Guardian* the previous day, "Brilliant Tara Too Poor to Go Higher," about an A student who topped the Island exam in advance level geography, but did not qualify for a scholarship because she chose the wrong combination of subjects. Has this member of the talented tenth lost her chance to "escape" Trinidad?-not if I can convince the powers that be at my university to make an offer.

year-old novelist of some repute, based upon numerous plays produced in Trinidad, four novels and two collections of short stories. Indeed I expect that his trip to Europe is underwritten by some universities at which he will lecture. (He is, after all, traveling first class.) But, nothing really has changed. Well-known or not, mature writer or not, Lovelace must still go knocking on the doors of British publishers if he wants his work to come out bearing the imprint of a "respectable" press with the facilities to properly produce, publish, and promote it. The *European* publisher, the *European* review, the *European* prize are still the stamps of approval-the ultimate recognition and acceptance.

I expect the spirits of his literary ancestors, were they to return to their heirs as does Lovelace's flying African in *Salt*, would be disappointed to see their descendant still setting out on this same journey.

But, on the other hand, what tales I shall have to tell my grandchildren, whom I'll regale about my sharing with Lovelace the first leg of this trip, reading his manuscript as he, with that ever youthful, infectious smile and sparking eyes, frequently bounded back to my seat to see how I was responding. I imagine that my grandchild will thrill at this firsthand account as I have delighted in the accounts of Lamming and Selvon, meeting on that Middle Passage to a dream that for both of them came true, and as Lovelace's narrator thrills at his uncle's account of the flying African-for after all, what is a grandmother to offer but the life she has experienced and the wisdom and excitement of that lived life that she can pass on to her children's children.

"Guess what, Yoseph Warren," I'll begin, "that novel you are reading for class for which Lovelace won the Nobel Prize in 1999-well, would you believe that we traveled together on the first leg of his trip to England to seek a publisher. He was so excited [I'll exaggerate a bit] to seek my response to it, and all the way from Trinidad, I read and we chatted about *Salt*. You know, of course," I'll remind Yoseph, "that if you don't let yourself get weighted down with salt, you'll be able to fly like the ancestors"-and, I'll pray (but I won't say it aloud) that on his journey it will not be necessary for him to fly via England.